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SUBJECT: BENIN: PRESIDENT YAYI DECLARES FREE EDUCATION FOR PRIMARY
AND PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

¶1. In early November 2006, President Boni Yayi announced that primary and pre-primary education would be "free," meaning that schools would no longer be permitted to charge fees. However, families of students must still purchase their children's books and uniforms. At most of Benin's schools, the academic year begins with an appeal by school directors to parents for payments to purchase basic materials such as chalk, paper, and enrollment registers. Such fees imposed a financial burden in poor communities and helped depress enrollment. They also contravened Benin's constitutional requirement for compulsory primary education and stipulation that the government must "progressively" make education in public schools free.

¶2. President Yayi announced that the Ministry of Finance would immediately release school subsidy funds in the amount of 2.8 billion FCFA (approximately USD 5.5 million) for the 2006-07 school year, which began early October. He stipulated that the funds this year would go not only toward purchasing needed materials but also to repay parents who have already made contributions. To be sure that his message was well understood, he called on local leaders and elected officials to help raise awareness about the importance of completing basic education. President Yayi also sent a group of government ministers throughout the country to discuss this initiative with community members.

¶3. In his speech to the nation announcing the new policy, President Yayi emphasized the importance of basic education to Benin's economic development. In a country with a total adult literacy rate of just under 35%, achieving universally available primary education to provide basic numeracy, literacy and problem-solving skills is essential to reaching Benin's goals in economic growth. Yayi also announced a national forum in early December to discuss education issues in Benin.

¶4. COMMENT: The new policy sends a strong message about the importance of basic education that is perfectly in sync with programs by USAID and other donors promoting quality universal basic education. It is only one step in that process, however, and does not address many of the other constraints facing basic education in Benin. A shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate teacher training resources, and a lack of classrooms and textbooks are also significant problems that the Government must address if its earlier efforts to improve its curriculum and management are to succeed.
END COMMENT.

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